ENHANCING WRITING ABILITIES OF PRIMARY CLASS STUDENTS THROUGH COOPERATIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES: AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Cooperative learning stimulates students to acquire the knowledge as well as interpersonal and team skills. They were more confident to write because they could share their ideas and were not much worried about the mistakes. The objectives of this study were to determine how the use of cooperative learning approach affected the writing abilities of primary class students. The investigator took up 42 students of grade 5th of K.V. No1 Jammu (J&K-INDIA) for this experimental study. The research study was one-group pretest and post-test design. The pretest and post-test scores of writing test were compared using a dependent samples t-test measure; the study revealed that the students' post-test score was higher than their pretest score at the .01 level of significance. The study concludes that cooperative learning provides a less anxiety-producing context in terms of discussing, creating, and thinking in a group rather than in a whole class. A comfortable non-stressful environment is useful for learning and practicing English.

Key Words: *Writing Ability, Cooperative Learning Strategies and Anxiety.*

INTRODUCTION:

Cooperative learning is an instructional strategy based on the human instinct of cooperation. It is the utilization of the psychological aspects of cooperation and competition for curricular transaction and student learning. The concept of cooperative learning refers to instructional methods and techniques in which students work in small groups and are rewarded in some way for performance as a group. The idea behind the cooperative learning method is that when group rather than individuals are rewarded, students will be motivated to help one another to master academic materials. Cooperative learning is a successful teaching strategy in which small teams, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn, thus creating atmosphere of achievement.

A cooperative classroom increasingly emphasizes mediated learning. Mediation can be defined as facilitating, modeling and coaching. Facilitating involves creating rich environment and activities for linking new information to prior knowledge, providing opportunities for cooperative work and problem solving, and offering students a multiplicity of authentic learning tasks. Coaching involves giving hints or clues, providing feedback, redirecting students' efforts and helping their use of a strategy. That is to provide them with right amount of help when they need it.

Cooperative learning approach is based on a theoretical framework that provides general principles on how to structure cooperative learning activities in a teacher's specific subject area, curriculum, students, and setting. It is the one that teachers can use to stimulate students to acquire the knowledge as well as interpersonal and team skills. It helps to promote student-student interaction via working in small groups to maximize their learning and reach their shared goal (Brown: 1994). Cooperative learning is designed to support group cooperation and interaction among students. In teaching, we can achieve many different compatible goals from using cooperative learning activities. This teaching approach can be used in various levels of learning, also on high levels. Being active learners is essential for students both when they work individually and when they work in groups.

As Johnson (2005) puts it, cooperation is not assigning a job to a group of students where one student does all the work and the others put their names on the paper. It is not having students sit side by side at the same table to talk with each other as they do their individual assignments as well. It is not having students do a task individually with instructions that the ones who finish first are to help the slower students. On the contrary, cooperative learning is a teaching strategy in which small teams, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn, thus creating an atmosphere of achievement. Students work through the assignment until all group members successfully understand and complete it.

Five Basic Elements of Cooperative Learning Approach

Cooperative efforts are expected to be more productive under certain conditions. The teachers should perceive the five basic elements of cooperative learning approach. The elements are as follows:

1. Positive Interdependence. The first requirement for an effectively structured cooperative learning environment is that students believe they "sink" or "swim" together. Johnson, Johnson and Stanne (2003) state that team members are believed to rely on one another to achieve the goal. If any team members fail to do their part, everyone suffers consequences. Therefore, whatever task students are given to perform, each group member must feel that his or her contribution is necessary for the group's success. Students have to learn to work together in order to accomplish tasks. This is why learning task must be designed in a way that makes them believe "they sink or swim together". Through the assigned material, students learn to achieve the goal.

2. Face – to – face Interaction. The second element of cooperative learning requires face – to face interaction among students whereby they promote each other's learning and success. Johnson (2005) suggests that it is necessary to maximize the opportunities for them to help, support, encourage, and praise each other. Such interaction helps to promote the following:

> ➤ 2.1 orally explaining how to solve problems
> ➤ 2.2 teaching one's knowledge to others
> ➤ 2.3 checking for understanding
> ➤ 2.4 discussing concepts being learned
> ➤ 2.5 connecting present with past learning

3. Individual and Group Accountability. The third element leads to the belief "What students can do together today, they can do alone tomorrow". The purpose of cooperative learning groups is to make each member a stronger individual. Individual accountability exists when the performance of each individual student is assessed, and the results are given back to the groups. Therefore, the group knows who needs more assistance, support, and encouragement in completing the job.

4. Interpersonal and Small – Group Skills. Students must be taught the social skills and be motivated to use them. Social skills which are needed for both teamwork and task work include leadership, decision – making, trust – building, communication, and conflict – management skills.

5. Group Processing. Group members should think about how well they have cooperated as a team and how to enhance their future cooperation. Some of the keys to successful processing are allowing sufficient time for it to take place, emphasizing positive feedback, and maintaining student involvement in processing. To be cooperative, group members must promote each other's learning and success face – to – face, hold each other personally and individually accountable to do a fair share of the work, use the interpersonal and small group skills needed for cooperative efforts to be successful, and process as a group how effectively members are working together. These five essential elements must be present for small group learning to be truly cooperative.

Cooperative Learning Strategies

Cooperative learning strategies could be used during the process of writing that is planning, translating and reviewing, so that the product produced by the group is good. During the process of drafting a composition lot of discussions takes place. It encourages the students to think in the language. But the teachers should motivate the students to participate in good discussions.

1.   Jigsaw: Groups with five students are set up. Each member is assigned some material to learn and to teach to his group members. The representative of the students working on the same topic gets together and discusses the important concepts and the ways to teach it to the whole class. After the practice in these "expert" groups the original groups get together and teach each other. Tests and assessments follow.

2.   Think-Pair-Share: This is a simple and quick technique; the instructor develops   and poses questions, gives the students a few minutes to think about a response, and then asks students to share their ideas with a partner. This task gives them opportunity to collect and organize their thoughts. "Pair" and "share' components encourage learners to compare and contrast their understanding with those of another, and to rehearse their response first in a low-risk situation before going public with the whole class.

3.   Three-Step Interview: Each member of a team chooses another member to be a partner. During the first step individuals interview their partner by asking clarifying questions. During the second step partners reverse roles. For the final step, members share their partner' response with the team.

4.   Round Robin: It is a primarily a brainstorming technique in which students generate ideas but do not elaborate, explain, evaluate, or question the ideas. Group members take turns responding to a question with words, phrases, or short answers. The order of responses is organized by proceeding from one student to another until all students have had an opportunity to speak. This technique helps in generating many ideas because all students participate, because it discourages comments that interrupt or inhibit the flow of ideas. The ideas could be used to develop a piece of good paragraph on a given topic.

5.   Three-minute review: Teacher stops any time during a lecture or discussion on the various formats of letter writing, report writing, etc and give team members three minutes to review what has been said, ask clarifying questions or answer questions.

6.   Numbered Heads: A team or four is established. Each member is given number 1,2,3 and four. Questions are asked of the group. Groups work together to answer the questions so that all can verbally answer the questions. Teacher calls out a number (three) and the number three in each group is asked to give the answer. This could be used for comprehension exercises.

7.   Buzz Groups: Buzz groups are teams of four to six students that are formed quickly and extemporaneously. They discuss on a particular topic or different topics allotted to them. The discussion is informal and they exchange the ideas. Buzz Groups serve as a warm-up to whole-class discussion. They are effective for generating information and ideas in a short period of time. This technique could be used to write essays on current issues.

8.   Talking Chips: In talking chips, students participate in a group discussion, surrendering a token each time they speak. This technique ensures equitable participation by regulating how often each group member is allowed to participate. This technique encourages reticent students to participate and solve communication or process problems, such as dominating or clashing group members.

9.   Write Around: For creative writing or summarizing, teachers could give a sentence starter (for e.g. If there were no animals on the earth / A child met a fairy in a garden.etc..) . Then all students in each team have to finish the sentence. Then, they pass the paper to the right, read the one they receive, and add sentence to than one. After a few round, four great summaries or stories emerge. Students should be given time to add a conclusion and/or edit their favourite one to share with the class.

10.   Praise-Question-Polish: In this technique the group members take turns to read aloud their papers as their other group members follow along with copies. First, the respondents are asked to react to the piece of writing by asking them to identify what they liked about the work (Praise), then identify what portion of the writing they did not understand (Question), finally offering specific suggestions for improvement of the writing (Polish). The students would be able to improve their own writing by critically evaluating the writing of their peers.

 Cooperative Learning Strategy and Writing Process

 Cooperative learning has been implemented in many areas including language instruction. Olsen and Kagan (1992) strongly believe that Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) offers a chance for interaction among students and helps integrate content learning into language learning. Since CLL provides students with an opportunity to be responsible for learning, as well as helping one another to reach the goal, the supportive environment is meaningful to language learners (Yeh, 2008). Activities and interaction among group members emphasize communicative skill, encouraging them to practice language usage in various situations. CLL will be more efficient if students learn the meaning and function of the language at the same time.

 Writing is a creative process because it is a process of reaching out for one's thought and discovering them. Writing, as such is a process of meaning making.Therefore, in order to help students improve their writing skill, process writing approach should be combined with cooperative learning. Process writing focuses on development of the written tasks as the whole process, from the starting point to final draft (White and Arndt, 1991). It is important for writing teachers to understand how process of writing works in order to help students increase problem-solving skills when they get involved in each stage. According to Seow (2002), the process writing approach consists of 4 major stages

➢ Planning or pre-writing ;

➢ Drafting,

➢ Revising,

➢ Editing.

In the stage of prewriting, a teacher proposes the writing topic to class, raises motivation, sets up writing purposes, determines audience, discusses the contents with students, screens and reads contents, plans the writing, and outlines it. During this stage, there are many techniques to employ such as brainstorming, discussing, making notes, clustering, and rapid free writing. The second step is the drafting. After the students get enough ideas to produce a piece of writing, they put the idea on the paper quickly. Anyway, they still do not need to pay much attention to appropriate language, grammar and spelling. The focus of this stage is on the ideas that the students want to convey to the reader, the purpose of writing and pattern and mechanics appropriate to the topic. In the third step of revising, the students are given feedback in terms of content, language and mechanics so that they can improve their writing. Editing is the last stage where the students consider the feedback they receive, then review their work, improve and correct it. After editing the draft, the students may go back and forth to the earlier stages such as the planning stage in order to find more information and include it. They must review and edit the task to perfection in order to be ready for submission. Encouraging the students to be creative thinkers by using process writing approach is usually done through cooperative learning approach.

Thus, in the writing classroom, the small group and pairs work is commonly used in the writing process. Cooperative learning strategy provides opportunities to students to work in groups for generating ideas, to cooperatively collect and organize materials, to give and receive peer feedback and to allow authentic audience other than the teacher. The main principle of cooperative learning is that the students help each other in learning, and all students are a part of the learning. They have to exchange their knowledge and idea or explain some parts to their peers. Interestingly, considerable research studies demonstrate that cooperative learning produces higher achievement and positive attitudes.

Seetape (2003) studied the effects of cooperative learning on English reading achievement and students' behaviors towards this learning method used in the English classroom. The result of the study indicated that the posttest scores after learning English reading using cooperative learning were higher than the pretest scores at the .05 level of significance. Most of the samples showed very good behavior in cooperating in their tasks. Their cooperative behavior had increasingly been developed. Some elements of poor behavior had decreased by up to 14.29 percent.

Another study was conducted to find out the use of a cooperative learning technique to improve students' writing skills. The result showed that all students in the class scored higher on the post writing than the pre-writing, at a level of .05. Students could perform a more complete and well organized writing after the intervention (Duangjai, 2008).

Dina Al- Jamal (2009) studied the impact of peer response in enhancing ninth grader's writing skill. The study found out that peer response technique affected the students' attitudes positively in a way that enhanced the development of their writing skill.

Likewise, Servetti (2010) did a study on cooperative learning used as a correction and grammar revision technique and considered the data collected in six Italian parallel classes, three of which (sample classes) corrected mistakes and revised grammar through cooperative learning, while the other three (control classes) did so in a traditional way. The data reported in this study indicated that CL activities on correction and grammar revision had positive effects in two ways. First of all, the students who worked within CL groups corrected successfully many more mistakes than individual students. Secondly, the comparison of the self-correction rates between sample and control classes showed that the students who worked within CL groups were able to correct successfully more mistakes than control students. In conclusion, the findings show that these instructional tools were effective in improving students' reading and writing skills. Therefore, as an English teacher, the researcher would like to find out whether the cooperative learning approach can improve students' writing skills of primary class students.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

1. To examine the effects of using cooperative learning on primary class students' writing abilities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

i. The current study is one-group pretest-posttest design. The data were collected from one section consisting of 42 Fifth grade students of K.V.No1 Jammu (J&K). Six weeks were used for the experiment using cooperative learning method. First, the pre-and post-tests were designed to gain students' writing scores. Time allowed for writing was 30 minutes. Students were given a topic to write a paragraph, containing at least 60-70 words. The writing scores were calculated for a mean. Mean scores of the writing tests of the two groups were compared using a paired sample t-test to reveal any changes in performance of writing. P values < 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

ii. In the first week, the subjects were given a pretest. They were then placed in the high, average, and low groups according to their scores. Using mean, median, and mode to group the students, the researcher got 7 groups, each of which contained 6 members; two high students, two average students and two low students.

iii. During weeks 2-6 students worked together in their group in order to complete the assignment about writing. Each week the teacher gave students in each group a topic to share ideas. During the working step, the teacher asked some questions to encourage the students to define ideas or information related to the topic. The students discussed with group members together with the teacher to get some more ideas for writing a draft. Later, they worked in groups to look over the draft, check the details of grammar as well as spelling and punctuation. During this step, they might adjust or add contents to create their final writing. Again, in week 6, the students were given a topic to write a paragraph which also functioned as the posttest.

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

Research Question 1: Will the use of cooperative learning approach help students to improve their writing abilities?

Table A

Means of the Pre-Test and Post-Test of the Students of Grade 5th studying English

	N	Mean	S.D.	t
Pre-test	42	13.63	3.56	6.67*
Post test	42	16.92	3.67	

The result showed in Table A shows that the mean score of the posttest was higher than that of the pretest. As evidenced by the significant difference at the level of .01, it clearly illustrated that using the cooperative learning approach helped students of grade 5th to improve their writing abilities.

CONCLUSIONS:

The research finding indicates that using cooperative learning approach and process writing practice contributed to students' writing ability. The reasons for this finding could be explained by many reasons. First of all, the composition of the cooperative learning groups enabled students to write a better paragraph than working alone. They had opportunities to share and learn with their peers. Student-student interaction via working in small groups can maximize their learning. (Brown: 1994). Cooperative learning stimulates students to acquire the knowledge as well as interpersonal and team skills. They were more confident to write because they could share their ideas and were not much worried about the mistakes. Second, the score improvement could be explained by the fact that cooperative learning creates a comfortable non-stressful environment for learning and practicing English. Cooperative learning provides a less anxiety-producing context in terms of discussing, creating, and thinking in a group rather than in a whole class. A comfortable non-stressful environment is useful for learning and practicing English. It helps students to have more fun in classroom. Third, in cooperative learning environment, students had a chance to generate, discuss, analyze and synthesize ideas to determine the answer for the group. This platform could lead to critical thinking and better understanding. Lastly,

when working together, each student could see how much effort the members made in sharing the various roles. Everyone possessed a sense of community. So, some students changed learning behavior since they realized that a group's performance depended on each individual contributing.

In cooperative learning the student are given opportunity to write and to revive and rewrite what they have written. Peer criticism aids students sharpen their knowledge about essays structure and grammatical rules. In order to evaluate effectively someone else's papers students must know what to look for and be able to justify their comments. It also provides the student with the opportunity of evaluating his or her own work. They demonstrate more confidence in writing and decrease their apprehensions towards writing. Teaching through this would be equally interesting both for the teacher and the students. The students working with partners ask each other for help and improve their attitude towards writing. They will show high level of enthusiasm, curiosity and involvement in being taught through cooperative learning tasks. Thus, an incorporation of these activities will be of great benefit to the student community and help them enhance their writing skills.

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